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Fair game:
The influence of cultural norms in creating sanctioned targets in the workplace

Abstract

This paper builds on the notion of ‘fair game’ and introduces the concept of ‘sanctioned target’ to examine the mechanism through which an individual or group come to be treated as such. For this study, national culture and values were the backdrop in the exploration of these themes, and data was collected from undergraduate and postgraduate students in four Business Schools in India, Turkey and Australia. Despite the diversity in the cultures studied, qualitative analysis of responses suggest that a number of dimensions seem to be common elements in attributing lower value to an individual or group (in effect making them sanctioned targets) across all three countries. Differences were also detected in the findings, these related to less visible factors that create diversity amongst individuals and groups. Results offer valuable insights for the detection, prevention and management of negative behaviors in workplaces and across national cultures.

Keywords

Diversity, sanctioned target, abuse, bullying, cultural norms, fair game

Introduction

Much has been written about negative and abusive behaviors in the schoolyard and workplace (e.g. Duffy & Sperry, 2012; Fenclau, Albright, Crothers & Kolbert, 2014). The literature is thorough in its coverage of the nature of these behaviors, their antecedents and consequences at the individual and organizational levels and in different settings (e.g. Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2011; Lipinski & Crothers, 2014). Different studies have also considered the characteristics of victims and perpetrators from first as well as second hand accounts (e.g. Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). The mechanism by which someone comes to be the target of abusive and unwanted attention, and the influence of social phenomena (Escartin et al., 2013) on these factors, however, remain under-researched. Here, the wider context, including national culture and values may be a factor; this would require a contingency approach for detection, prevention and management of these negative behaviors (Loh, Restubog & Zagenczyk, 2010). This paper reports some of the findings of a large-scale study of abusive behaviors across three very different cultural settings: India, Turkey and Australia. The focus of the paper is on convergence and divergence of factors in each cultural context that may make someone vulnerable, a target, and ultimately ‘fair game’. The main contribution of this paper is the exploration of the notion of the ‘sanctioned target’ in different cultural and organizational settings.

Fair Game

The notion of ‘fair game’ is well understood in English speaking countries with consensus on the origins of the phrase. Fair game refers to an individual or group that is a legitimate target, with the roots of the expression dating back to Britain in the 1700-1800s. The expression was used “against a background of abundant restrictive legislation that gave the ruling class of Britain exclusive rights to the countryside and its creatures.” Under this

legislation animals and birds considered to be of lower quality as food sources could be lawfully hunted by commoners (<http://users.tinyonline.co.uk/gswithenbank/sayingsf.htm>). These 'sanctioned targets' were typically attributed low-value and were therefore available as 'prey' to the general masses. Interestingly, there is current debate in one Australian State parliament around sanctioning particular non-native species (i.e. those that do not 'belong') as legitimate targets for licensed shooters (Perpitch & Adolf, 2013).

In the modern day, in the context of interpersonal interactions, a number of different but consistent explanations for the phrase 'fair game' have emerged:

- "Legitimate object for ridicule or attack" (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/fair+game>)
- "Someone or something that is fair to criticise or attack" (<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/fair-game>)
- "If someone or something is fair game, it is acceptable, reasonable or right to criticise them" (<http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/fair-game>)

Each explanation above, although slightly different, has the notion of a 'sanctioned target' at its heart. That is, there appears to be legitimate approval to victimize, hunt, or attack a target or individual. What is it that makes the target vulnerable, of low value and unwanted and therefore 'okay' to prey upon? Could it be certain characteristics relating to status and standing that expose the target? Could these be: gender, physical characteristics, mannerisms, ethnicity, cultural class, perceived low power base or worth, or other factors? What are the implications for human interactions in the workplace? The aim of this paper is to consider these questions, and to examine convergence, and divergence drawing on a three-country study of negative and abusive workplace behaviors.

Workplace ecology

Workplaces, as with the natural environment, are open systems. Different individuals, groups, communities and populations interact, adapt and compete for survival. Cycles are formed in such settings which comprise interrelated structures, components and workplace relationships. Stability in these systems is usually derived through some form of hierarchical connection, in turn leading to equilibrium. This in turn creates workplace 'ecological niches' (e.g. as explained in the context of social work by Germain & Gitterman, 1987). The struggle to compete and survive at times depends on the context, climate or culture of the setting (Van der Vliert, Matthiesen, Gangsoy, Landro, & Einarsen, 2010), and interrelated complex relationships similar to those seen in nature: mutualism (where both parties benefit), commensalism (where one party benefits only), or parasitism (one party survives only because of the other/host) to name a few (Omari, Paull & Crews, 2013). Here, each member or player needs to 'fit' or 'belong' in order to make contributions and continue to survive and thrive.

Most workplace settings are ordered through official structures where each member takes their place in the hierarchy. Those with status, power and prestige are at the top, and others take their place on the lower rungs. The social 'pecking-order' is established as a result of one's social status; not necessarily in keeping with the official structures. This is recognized by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982) where interpersonal relationships

influence and are influenced by the degree to which we connect or identify with others. The social or unofficial structures have a role to play in determining how well an individual fits or does not in an organization. But, what are the factors that assign value and determine the worth of an individual, and therefore the notions of 'fit' and 'belonging' in wider organizational settings? And, do these vary, as it may be expected, in different cultural contexts?

Humans are social animals and belonging or fitting-in is hardwired into our psyche and a fundamental basic need. It is not without reason that solitary confinement is considered an escalated form of punishment and torture. The need to maintain self-esteem relates to our concepts of self. Social perception (Bratton, Sawchuk, Forshaw, Callinan & Corbett, 2010) suggests that we evaluate the characteristics of the groups we belong to favorably (in-groups) and those of other groups (out-groups) negatively. These in-group out-group behaviors are prevalent in most workplaces. "Social identities encourage in-group favoritism" (Robbins, Judge, Millett & Boyle, 2014) reflecting the notions of sameness, fitting in and belonging. Could it be that those who are not one of 'us' or do not fit or belong are seen as low value assets or resources, disposable or fair game? The findings of this study suggest that there is a range of converging themes across the three countries, but that there are also areas of divergence.

Country profiles

This section will provide a brief description of each of the countries from which data was collected for this study. Gannon and Pillai's (2013) cultural metaphors representing " ... all or most of the underlying values expressive of the culture itself" (p. xiv) will form the main frame for explanation for each country with additional demographic data sourced from the The World Factbook compiled by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2013).

India

Gannon and Pillai (2013) describe India through two metaphors: the 'Dance of Shiva' with its contrasts of grace and aggression; and a 'Kaleidoscope of diversity' representing color and moving patterns relating to: languages, customs, food habits, dress, art. With a vast population, estimated at over 1.1 billion, geographical dispersion and various religious and ethnic backgrounds, India is described as a land of unity and diversity at the same time. Gannon and Pillai (2013) talk of the masculinization of the population in India where girls are taught to be submissive and docile from an early age. The importance placed on the caste system is no longer as overt as it once was, but is very much alive, especially in rural settings. In India, 72% of the population are of Indo-Aryan heritage, 80.5% identify as Hindus, and 41% have Hindi as their first language (The World Factbook - CIA, 2013).

Turkey

Turkey is the gateway to both the East and the West as one of two countries in the world which are partly in Europe, and partly in Asia. Gannon and Pillai (2013) describe Turkey as an authority ranking high context culture seen to be high in both collectivism and power distance, with autocratic one-way relationships between superiors and subordinates. The authors describe the Turkish culture as one where there is male dominance described

through the metaphor of the 'Coffee house', a gathering place reserved for men to come together for "recreation, communication and community integration" (p. 79). With over 80 million people, Turkey has a vast Muslim population (99.8%), the traditions of the religion are strong and the country fairly uniform in ideology, belief and ethnicity (70 – 75% Turkish) (The World Factbook - CIA, 2013).

Australia

Gannon and Pillai (2013) choose the metaphor of 'Outdoor recreational activity' to describe Australia; a country of migrants where 25% of the population were born overseas with another 25% estimated to have at least one parent who is foreign born. High individualism and low power distance are characteristics of the culture as is the notion of 'mateship'. Traditionally, those who try to differentiate themselves from the masses by rising above others (i.e. tall poppies) are not tolerated and cut down to size (p. 587). Between 1901 – 1973, the 'White Australia Policy' was enacted to ensure racial harmony through controlling migration patterns of those not from traditionally white ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, with a population of over 22 million people, although highly multicultural due to three post WWII waves of migration from Europe and Asia, 92% of Australians are classified as 'white' with Christianity as the dominant religion (27.4% Protestant, 25.8% Catholic, 7.9% other Christian denominations, and 2.7% Eastern Orthodox) (The World Factbook - CIA, 2013).

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are from a larger exploratory study of bullying and abusive behaviors across three countries: India, Turkey and Australia. Participants were recruited from postgraduate and undergraduate students in four Business Schools, two in Australia, and one each in India and Turkey. The dataset included responses from each country: India 42%, Turkey 25% and Australia 33%. The gender of the respondents was fairly evenly split at: male = 56% and female = 44%. The age profile of the respondents was diverse with the vast majority (72%) in the 22 – 34 age group. Nationality and ethnic origin were far more homogenous in India and Turkey, with Australia showing more diversity as was expected.

The study received approval from the Human Ethics Committee or Faculty from each of the four universities. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and not associated with marks in any unit. All participants were asked to complete an on-line questionnaire which focused on different aspects of negative and inappropriate workplace behaviors as target, or bystander. The on-line survey contained closed and open-ended questions both of a quantitative and qualitative nature. This paper reports on one aspect of the study, that is, the reason why individuals believed they came to be targets of the unwanted and abusive behaviors. The responses to the relevant survey questions were open-ended and qualitative, due to this factor, and the exploratory nature of the study, thematic analysis was used to discern patterns in the responses received.

Emerging themes

This section will be divided into four main parts. First, the notion and dimensions of diversity and difference will be explored, this will be followed by a discussion of fit and

belonging. The section will conclude with convergent and divergent findings of the study across the three different cultural settings.

Diversity

Differences and unknowns have long been associated with fear and suppression; this is well documented in change management literature (Cummings & Worley, 2008). The barriers to the lack of acceptance of differences are usually attributed to factors such as, stereotypes, prejudice, ethnocentrism, discrimination and harassment (de Janasz, Wood, Gottschalk, Dowd & Schneider, 2007). In the cultural context of organizations, the findings of this study point to differences resulting in a tacit understanding that those who do not fit in, or are not as valued (i.e. fair game), may be 'sanctioned targets' for abusive and negative behaviors.

Loden (1995, cited in de Janasz, Wood, Gottschalk, Dowd & Schneider, 2007) identifies two dimensions of diversity: primary and secondary. The former includes the more immediately apparent characteristics of age, gender, mental/physical abilities, race, ethnic heritage and sexual orientation; and the latter less apparent factors such as; work experience, income, religion, language, organizational role and level, communication style, family status, work style and education. A question to be asked here would be whether diverse cultural contexts influence the acceptance or rejection of these two dimensions of difference?

In a recent large-scale study, Power et al. (2013) found that in Asia, where the culture expects the masses to submit to the interests of the group, and there is a strong acceptance of hierarchy, workplace bullying is more tolerated. This may point to inappropriate behaviors and bullying being expected in work settings by those lower in the hierarchy. Does this make this lower ranked group 'fair game' or of lesser worth? Power et al. (2013) also report that in more equality based cultures (such as Australia), targets suffer more when subject to these negative behaviors due to the expectation of fairness and equality. The findings of Power et al.'s (2013) study point to different experiences of workplace bullying in different cultural contexts, an area worthy of further exploration.

Fit and belonging

A quote from a study participant in the Australian cohort: "A FIFO (fit in or f--- off) policy was introduced by senior management to remove people they felt did not belong" is quite telling as it points to factors other than those in the primary dimension (i.e. gender, ethnic diversity, age) being indicators of like mindedness and fit. This in turn affects social status and creates a tradition of elites or those who are 'accepted' in the relevant (cultural) setting. Such findings are in line with those of other studies, for example on the related notion of incivility (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta & Magley, 2013) and from schoolyard bullying literature (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, Kaukiainen, 1996).

Social status and individual standing seems to be a common theme in the data from all three countries:

- "Bullying comes into exist[ence] when you are weak four dimensionally, that is financially, physically, intellectually and spiritually" (Australia)
- " ... disliked me for not being like minded to them" (Australia)

- “They were all practically from the same community” (Australia)
- “this is his place and anyone who has ideas against him will be fired” (Turkey)
- “This is about his character ... He does not have any close personal relationships in his personal life as well, no close friends, no wife, no neighbor” (Turkey)
- “inferiority complex” (Turkey)
- “ ... Communication with me alone (only Indian) while my peers (3 other Americans) were treated differently” (India).
- “ ... he didn’t like me because I showed no interest in interacting with him and chose to speak to others” (India)
- “I was in a large man-power orientated organization” (India)

The quotes from the different countries indicate that regardless of national culture, stratification seems to be along both social and ideological lines with lower value ascribed to those who are different to the norm in each setting.

There is a plethora of evidence suggesting that as humans, we are comfortable and at ease with those who are similar to us, or remind us of ourselves. Notions such as social and group identification (Tajfel, 1982; Tolman, 1943 cited in Ashford & Mael, 1989) and the Attraction-Selection-Assimilation thesis (Baron & Byrne, 2004) indicate that people relate to, like and feel comfortable with those who are similar to them in various ways.

Differences often lead to not fitting in or belonging. It is well documented in workplace abuse and bullying scenarios that difference is often the precursors to the negative behaviors (e.g. D’Cruz & Noronha, 2013; Koczyński & Evans, 2013). For example, Archer (1999) found bullying due to race and gender was an aspect of Fire Services culture in the UK to perpetuate the continuation of the white male culture. Diversity can therefore be seen as a potential reason for being bullied. Here, reference can also be made to a famous Japanese proverb: ‘The nail that sticks out gets hammered’ (Hannabus, 1998).

Relating these early findings to the notion of fair game, it can be said that in settings where there is low diversity tolerance lower value is associated with those who do not fit or belong. This then becomes a mechanism for diverse individuals or groups becoming sanctioned targets.

Convergence - Similarities across all three countries

Considering the dimensions of diversity, the findings of this study point to primary diversity characteristics (i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, general characteristics and appearance) across all three countries studied being factors in attracting abusive behaviors. Convergence in these identifying themes will be discussed below.

Gender

Earlier in this paper in discussing the profiles of the three countries it became apparent that the traditional Indian and Turkish cultures are more male-centric resulting in women at times not being seen as having equal value or belonging. These results point to expectations

of a clear delineation between the expected social status and traditional roles of men and women in society and the workplace, in effect exposing women to becoming vulnerable and therefore sanctioned targets.

- “he was doing this especially to female employees (Turkey)
- “because of being girl” (Turkey)
- “verbally abused me by calling unwanted nicknames, stereotyping on the basis of gender” (India)
- “about the gender and having less capability and strength as compared to men”. (India)

Such themes were also mirrored in the Australian setting. The reasons for convergence in the equality matching Australian culture may be manifold. The responses from the Australian participants suggest that the influence of organizational culture, diversity in the population, or individual beliefs may be contributing factors.

- “Working in a male oriented work place as the only female I was often called a stupid girl or blamed for things that I hadn’t done” (Australia)
- “My Supervisor would bully girls ... He would never do it to the men just the women” (Australia)

Age

Triandis and Fiske’s typology (cited in Gannon and Pillai, 2013) links culture and economics. India and Turkey are both identified as authority ranking cultures in this typology (where there is high power distance and collectivism) and there is no standard unit of measurement in determining the gap in status (i.e. actual relative value). Australia on the other hand is seen as an equality matching culture (low on power distance and high on individualism). Here, value judgments are not made about individual worth and the gaps in status are uniform. Age was seen as an indicator of status in all three countries studied, however, in Turkey and India responses indicate that just by virtue of being young, there was a degree of acceptance that an individual would be subjected to abusive behavior.

- “ ... because of being young” (Turkey)
- “I was too young” (Turkey)
- “ ... because of my age” (India)
- “ ... because he thought he was more powerful than me because of the age difference” (India)

In the Australian context there seemed to be less of an acceptance of the negative behavior (in line with the contentions of Power et al., 2013), with some justifications being made for the reasons why someone was being victimized. These factors may include being seen to be more experienced, capable and therefore a threat despite being younger. This can be seen in the examples below.

- “I worked in a Cafe where I on a day to day basis felt bullied. I was the youngest member of the team however had the most experience, I would sometimes suggest new ideas to the manager which I thought would improve the Cafe however it felt to me that she always dismissed my ideas without consideration or without trying them. I constantly felt that because I was the youngest that she singled me out from other staff members.” (Australia)
- “I was the youngest. The lady who I took over from was only a couple of years older than me. It was her who was being real rude and making me feel as though I was stupid. I did not feel as though I could ask her any questions.” (Australia)

Ethnicity

Australia is the most heterogeneous of the three countries studied in terms of the ethnic composition of its population. India although fairly homogenous at face value has a number of significantly different sub-cultures due to its vast geography and population, with Turkey being the most homogenous of all resulting in more obvious differences.

- “Because I was a foreigner” (Turkey)
- “They didn’t share any information with me because I was a foreigner” (Turkey)

Results indicated that differences, in terms of ethnicity, were a factor in being singled out, attributed low value, and subjected to abusive behaviors in all three countries, however, the manifestation of the abuse seemed to be more veiled in the Australian and Indian contexts. That is, jokes and innuendo seem to be mechanisms by which individuals were subjected to abusive and negative behaviors in these two countries. It is relevant to note that both Australia and India are strongly influenced by the traditions of British colonization. Gannon and Pillai (2013) talk of British “restraint ... [and acting] distant and aloof” (p. 281). Such characteristics would make direct communications less likely and the use of more subtle forms of language interchange (i.e. meaning being conveyed through sarcasm, innuendo and jokes) more prevalent.

- “Making jokes, either racist or personal” (Australia)
- “ ... humor of a nationality” (Australia)
- “Jokes about cultural background” (India)
- “Because of cultural differences” (India)

General characteristics and appearance

General characteristics, in terms of mannerisms, behaviors, preferences, and appearance such as fashion choice and presentation were identified as points of difference and therefore reasons for abusive behaviors in all three countries studied. In Turkey and India, as more homogenous cultures, the points of difference seemed to be more obvious such as clothing, color of skin and food preferences.

- “ ... I was the fairest of the boys ... so they would all treat me as a girl and call me names” (India)
- “ ... bullied for my food habits as I am vegetarian” (India)

- “ ... due to different clothing” (Turkey)
- “ ... they criticized me, my personality not my work” (Turkey)

In Australia, yet again there seemed to be more subtlety in the identifying factors (e.g. behavioral preferences). Here, cultural norms would play a part in identifying certain characteristics and behaviors as acceptable or not, therefore attributing less value to those outside established norms and making them vulnerable to negative behaviors.

- “ ... picked on for what they look like or how they act” (Australia)
- “ ... female traits” (Australia)

Divergence

As well as similarities across the three cultures studied, the results of this research also identified a number of points of difference in factors resulting in people becoming vulnerable to abusive and bullying behaviors.

In Australia, the notions of mateship and ‘cutting down tall poppies’ (discussed earlier in this paper) were detected themes not seen in the findings from the other two countries. Comments such as:

- “Being chastised for not being a union member, being called names for the same, being stopped from working in order to be told all of this” (Australia); and
- “A “no dickheads” policy was also introduced, in which the lowest 10% of performers were systematically bullied and pressured into leaving” (Australia)

attest to those not fitting in with the dominant group (be it the union or the main workforce) being singled out and subjected to negative behaviors.

Another related example is in line with Trompenaars and Hampden Turner’s (2012) dimensions of Universalism (one set of rules applying to all, as in the case of Australia) versus Particularism (application of rules on a case by case basis). The example below is interesting in that, in an Australian country town where there is a tight knit community, there is the expectation of stronger bonds and therefore a more Particularist stance. The quote below, however, suggests the application of a universalist approach in a country town setting, in turn resulting in the respondent not fitting in with the values, norms and behaviors of the dominant (country town) group.

- “Manager of country town business with role central to community engaged in small scale theft and fraud on a recurring basis. I am highly ethical and would not follow his instructions that were contrary to procedure without recording all details, getting witnesses or altering the process in order to protect the assets or myself. Once I demonstrated such behavior he began inventing discipline issues and attempted to have me sacked.” (Australia).

Responses from the Indian participants identified two themes not seen in the Australian and Turkish context in this study. The first being the level of education as an isolating factor (e.g.

“I have a masters degree and my manager has a bachelor’s degree” (India). For the second there seemed to be tacit acceptance that more junior employees are to go through some process of hazing to be inducted into organizational life (e.g. “fun amongst seniors” (India) and “Such behavior might be the part of the culture prevalent in most banks, the act of degrading junior employees for no reason” (India)). Both of these factors have been known to exist in Australia as well, especially in blue collar work environments (e.g. Du Plessis & Corney, 2011), but did not come through in the findings of this study. A possible explanation may be a limitation associated with the survey group, that is, undergraduate and postgraduate Business students. It is more likely that university students work in white collar environments and have a stronger powerbase due to their skills and education.

That caste did not appear as an underlying dynamic within the Indian data may be explained in two ways. First, by the largely middle and upper caste profiles of students at the business school in question, and second by the possible reluctance of lower caste students to self identify as such.

The only theme in the Turkish data not identified as strongly in the Australian and Indian responses related to absolute superiority in everyway (i.e. “they thought they were god”). Here, there seemed to be tacit acceptance that there is a ‘place’ for everyone (in the pecking order) and should people dare to think or act outside their station they are making themselves open and vulnerable as targets of negative behaviors. This finding is also in line with Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s classification of subjugation orientated cultures (cited in Gannon and Pillai, 2013), such as those that are primarily Islamic and Middle Eastern (p. 73).

Tying together the threads: Fair game and sanctioned target

This papers reports on one aspect of a much larger study of negative workplace behaviors across three very different cultures. The focus of the paper was on the mechanism through which an individual or group come to be treated as fair game or sanctioned targets for negative behaviors. As expected, cultural values seem to play a large part in establishing norms and standards of conduct, and therefore social interactions. Results suggest that, despite the diversity in the cultures studied, a number of dimensions, mainly those identified as primary diversity characteristics seem to be common elements in attributing lower or lesser value to an individual or group across all three countries. Differences were, however, detected in the prevalence of secondary diversity factors across the three countries.

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that cultural norms are responsible for setting diversity tolerance thresholds. This in turn places value (high or low) on those who are seen as the ‘same’ or ‘different’ to the dominant group. A main contribution of this paper is the notion of sanctioned target, being groups or individuals which are ascribed lower value, status and standing in any setting. An understanding of the reasons why such a group is labeled or comes to being is important in detecting, managing and preventing negative and abusive behaviors in the workplace.

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